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THE WASHINGTON POST
1 November 1976

No New Leads Uncover Letelier Probe

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The far-reaching, highly sensitive, U.S. investigation of the recent bombing death here of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier has failed so far to score any significant breakthrough in solving the killing, according to informed sources.

So sensitive is the probe that it already has prompted discussions involving U.S. Attorney General Edward H. Levi and Central Intelligence Agency Director George Bush. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger has also been informed of developments.

Letelier, 44, former ambassador to the United States, foreign minister and minister of defense in the Marxist government of the late Chilean President Salvador Allende, died Sept. 21 when a bomb exploded beneath his car as he drove along Embassy Row here. One passenger, Ronnie K. Moffitt, also died. The bombing is under investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The CIA is "cooperating" in the probe, at least to the extent of supplying intelligence data, according to government officials.

According to FBI and Justice Department sources, the FBI has not cracked the case, and there is no sign that investigators are on the verge of a breakthrough.

The probe—here and abroad—has produced no major suspects, these sources say. FBI attempts to determine the nature of the bomb that caused the explosion have remained inconclusive, the sources say.

The investigation of Letelier's death, moreover, has become partly intertwined with a separate investigation by Caribbean nations of the crash of a Cuban airliner off Barbados Oct. 6, in which 73 persons died. A group of Venezuelans and Cuban exiles has been held in Caracas in connection with the investigation.

U.S. investigators in the probe of Letelier's killing are also checking leads among Cuban exile groups in the United States and Caribbean countries. Informed sources say, however, that the FBI had established no clear link between Cuban exiles and Letelier's murder.

CIA officials nevertheless say they believe that operatives of the present

Chilean military junta did not take part in Letelier's killing, according to informed sources. CIA director Bush expressed this view in a conversation late last week with Secretary of State Kissinger, the sources said. What evidence the CIA has obtained to support this initial conclusion was not disclosed.

The CIA's reported belief that Chilean operatives did not kill Letelier appears significant for two reasons. First, many critics of the current Chilean regime headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet have sought to link the Chilean junta with Letelier's death—a charge vehemently denied by Chilean officials. Second, the role of the CIA in the Letelier investigation already is stirring a behind-the-scenes controversy.

The issue of CIA involvement in the probe was raised during an unusual meeting Oct. 21 at which Attorney General Levi and other Justice Department officials discussed the Letelier investigation with several of Letelier's American colleagues and his widow, Isabel.

According to several sources, the group expressed misgivings about the CIA's role in the investigation and urged Levi to use formal subpoenas to obtain information from the CIA. Levi, these sources said, rejected this proposal, saying that the CIA was cooperating with investigators and that such a move was not timely.

The meeting itself—drawing the attorney general directly into a murder investigation—appeared symptomatic of the U.S. government's intense concern over how the Letelier investigation is carried out.

Among those who talked with Levi, in addition to Mrs. Letelier, were Marcus G. Raskin, codirector of the Institute for Policy Studies, Saul Landau, an associate fellow of the institute, and Michael E. Tigar, a lawyer representing them. Among Justice Department officials present was Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene M. Propper, who is coordinating the Letelier investigation. Letelier had headed a foreign affairs research program at the Institute for Policy Studies before his death.

There has been at least one other high-level meeting at which the CIA's role in the Letelier probe was discussed. As The Washington Post previously reported, CIA director Bush

to knowledgeable sources, according to government disclosures last year, was involved in efforts to overthrow the Allende regime—the government in which Letelier had served.

In addition, the CIA has had ties to Cuban exiles and others who have now, according to informed sources, come under scrutiny in the Letelier investigation. These links raise the possibility, according to government officials, that an attempt to prosecute Letelier's assassins, if they are discovered, could endanger "national security" by disclosure of classified information.

The CIA also is restricted by its charter and other government regulations from engaging in some domestic activities. The official basis for its participation in the Letelier investigation has not been disclosed. Under "guidelines" for U. S. intelligence operations issued by President Ford last February, it appears possible that CIA involvement in the Letelier probe might be justified on a number of grounds.

In defense of the CIA, Justice Department officials say the intelligence agency is caught in an awkward position in the Letelier investigation. If it did not participate, it would risk criticism for concealing information. By participating, it opens itself to attack for allegedly manipulating the probe, these officials say.

At the time of his death, Letelier was the most prominent Chilean critic in the United States of the Pinochet regime. After Allende's overthrow Sept. 11, 1973, Letelier had been imprisoned in Chile for 364 days. He came to the United States soon after his release.

Letelier, Michael Moffitt and Moffitt's wife were on their way to the Institute for Policy Studies, a leftist "think tank" where all three worked, when Letelier's car was wrecked by a bomb that exploded as they crossed Sheridan Circle along Massachusetts Avenue NW. Michael Moffitt survived without serious injury.

Although the federal investigation

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